

## **Green Paper "Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between generations" Comments by Ireland: November, 2005**

Ireland welcomes the publication of this Green Paper. Demographic change is one of the major challenges to be addressed by societies in Europe over the coming decades, across many policy areas, but especially in relation to employment, social protection, social inclusion and immigration. The Green Paper contains an excellent analysis of demographic change and many key policy issues are identified. In this response to the questionnaire, Ireland deals broadly with the issues, focussing mainly on the development of processes at EU and national level that can best facilitate the ongoing development of effective policy responses.

### **Introduction**

Demographic trends have a major impact on economic, employment and social policy. It is important that these trends are comprehensively measured, monitored, analysed and their policy implications identified at both national and EU level.

The objectives of this process should include

\* ensuring that the highest standards in the measurement, monitoring and analysis of demographic trends are achieved in all member States.

\* coordinating the process in order to facilitate comparisons being made between trends in the various member States in assessing the policy implications, and identifying the causes of both positive and negative developments,

\* using the knowledge gained to exchange experiences and good practice in relation to

- supporting stable family life,
- prevention of marital and family breakdown and effective supports for families experiencing such breakdown,
- facilitating couples in having the desired number of children and eliminating economic, employment and social barriers to achievement of that goal
- supporting effective parenting in a changing society
- achieving the right life/work balance
- developing the right mix of policies to support the growing numbers of elderly people
- facilitating a regional/local focus on supports for families
- promoting the integration of immigrants.
- promoting gender equality in relation to all of the above.

Policy areas should include employment, income support and pensions, education and training, child and elder care, health, and housing.

## **1. The Challenges of European Demography (pages 4 to 6)**

### **1.1 The challenge of a low birth rate (pages 5 and 6)**

One of the main consequences of increased female participation in the workforce is that for many couples work/life has become considerably unbalanced in favour of work demands. Another consequence is that the burden of family care is being disproportionately borne by women. Many countries have responded to this to a greater or lesser extent with varying degrees of success. These have been widely documented and analysed, including in various OECD publications.

Family care of children and the elderly is still essential, backed up with adequate child care and elder care services, appropriate income support and other services. Employment conditions must be adapted to allow both parents the necessary flexibility to meet their care responsibilities. The answers to the specific questions can best be found from an analysis of best practice among EU countries, a task which can be best undertaken by the EU Commission, drawing on the relevant national action plans and other studies carried out to date.

### **1.2 The possible contribution of immigration**

One of the consequences of demographic ageing is labour market shortages in both high skill and low skill employments. Well managed immigration can greatly assist in meeting these labour market shortages. However, there is a real danger that in focussing on labour market needs the social consequences of immigration for both immigrants themselves, the wider society both in the host country and the sending country, will be lost. Ireland, therefore, welcomes the debate initiated by the Green Paper last January. Significant and fruitful debate on the employment and social inclusion aspects of the subject also occurred at an International Conference on the theme "Reconciling Mobility and Social Inclusion - the role of employment and social policy" in Bundoran, Ireland in April, 2004. This was organised by the Irish EU Presidency with the support of the EU Commission. The Conference examined the impact of immigration from outside the EU, but also of mobility within the enlarged EU. A report on the Conference has been published and is also on the website [-www.socialinclusion.ie/publications.html](http://www.socialinclusion.ie/publications.html)

One of the Conference conclusions was that there would be much to be gained from the Commission facilitating, on a more systematic basis, exchanges on challenges and policy responses among member states in relation to immigration and mobility, and in promoting greater and more effective coordination of immigration, employment and social inclusion policies in this regard.

### **2.1 Better integration of young people (page 7)**

### **2.2 A new solidarity between the generations (pages 6 to 8)**

The issues identified under this heading are being addressed in a coordinated way under the National Action Plans on employment and on social inclusion, in the

development of which social dialogue has a key role. More specific headings, however, on the lines set out in this consultation document, could be included in the guidelines for the next plans, in order to ensure that the issues are adequately addressed. This particularly applies to forms of solidarity that can be fostered between young people and elderly people which would mainly be an issue for NAPs/inclusion.

## 2.2 A global approach to the "working life cycle" (page 8)

The issues identified here should be dealt with in the context of the employment plans, which could be given a more demographic trends/family focus.

## 2.3 A new place for "elderly people"

## 2.4 Solidarity with the very elderly (pages 9 and 10)

The issues identified here are being addressed through open coordination in relation to policies on pensions, health and long term care, employment, and social inclusion. The aim now should be to develop greater coordination between the relevant policy streams to focus on achieving the right mix of policies to more effectively meet the needs of the elderly at different stages along the continuum from being active and self-sufficient to being dependent.

## 3, Conclusion: What should the European Union's Role be?

For the reasons outlined above member states would greatly benefit from the EU facilitating exchanges and analysis of demographic change and its impact on societies and all the policies concerned. This process should also aim to promote a cross cutting "lifecycle" approach to policy at both national and EU levels in relation to the young, those in the prime age cycle, and the elderly, across relevant policy areas. This should apply in particular to employment, social protection, social inclusion and immigration policies. Demographic change also requires developing and building further capacity, particularly in relation to child and elder care, education and training and these need to be priorities for structural development.

Demographic change affects everybody, particularly in relation to families and family life, as well as a whole range of policy areas. Structured social dialogue and dialogue with civil society, including young people, is, therefore, essential at every stage of managing demographic change.

If demographic change is to become an integral part of internal and external policies, there first of all must be comprehensive analyses of such change at national and EU levels. This should involve clearly, regularly and systematically spelling out the implications of these changes for each relevant policy area. It should also involve, through use of the life cycle approach, promoting more effective coordination of policies to get the right "mix" for securing the best outcomes for each category. Common indicators to measure progress in achieving these outcomes also need be developed.

A number of these issues were also addressed in an International Conference organised by the Irish EU Presidency in Dublin in May 2004 with the support of the

EU Commission. The theme of the Conference was "Families, Change and European Social Policy". The Conference proceedings have been published and can also be accessed on the website: [http://www.welfare.ie/topics/eu\\_pres04/fam\\_conf/](http://www.welfare.ie/topics/eu_pres04/fam_conf/)